

House Passes DTV Delay Act

By a vote of 264 to 158, the House of Representatives approved S. 352, the DTV Delay Act, which will postpone the transition to digital television until June 12, 2009. This delay will grant millions of households the chance to be prepared for the transition and retain access to an important information resource.

Chairman Waxman gave the following statement in support of the bill:

"I rise in support of S. 352, the DTV Delay Act, which passed the Senate last week by unanimous consent. This legislation extends the digital television transition date and makes improvements to the converter box coupon program.

In 2005, Congress mandated that as of February 17, 2009, all television stations shut off their analog broadcasts and transmit in digital only. The transition from analog to digital will offer better pictures and sound, more programming choices, and interactive capabilities. It will also serve an important public safety purpose by freeing up spectrum for first responders for nationwide interoperable communications. Finally, it will provide consumers with new and innovative commercial wireless services.

Unfortunately, we are not yet prepared for this transition. The prior Administration assured the Committee on Energy and Commerce repeatedly that the transition effort was on track. But on December 24, 2008, the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) notified Congress that the converter box coupon program would run out of funding the first week of January and that it would need an additional \$250 to \$350 million to meet projected demand.

The DTV converter box coupon program is supposed to ease the financial burden of the transition. But it has ground to a halt. There are currently over 2 million households on the waiting list, and that number grows every day.

The coupon waiting list is not the only problem, and it may not be the biggest problem. The FCC has not adequately planned for call centers and other assistance for consumers who will face technical problems after the transition has occurred. If we transition as planned, millions of consumers will be left in the dark, with no place to turn for help.

The President's Transition Team asked Congress to extend the deadline for a brief period. This is not a step that anyone wants to take. But we have no good alternative. Without a short, one-time extension, millions of households will lose all television reception.

The measure before us extends the date of the transition to June 12 and extends the coupon program date until July 31, 2009. It will also allow those who hold expired coupons or never received their coupons because of problems with third class mail to reapply.

Moreover, the economic recovery package that the House passed last week includes \$650 million to fix the coupon program and intensify consumer education and support.

S. 352 also takes steps to lessen the impact on other affected parties, including public safety, broadcasters, and wireless licensees.

I am pleased that this bill has broad support in the public safety community, including the Association of Public-Safety Communications Officials-International (APCO), the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP), the International Association of Fire Chiefs (IAFC), and the National Emergency Number Association (NENA). It has the support of the two biggest winners of spectrum that will be vacated as a result of the DTV transition – AT&T and Verizon. It has the support of the National Association of Broadcasters, the major networks, and Univision. And, it has the support of a number of public interest groups, including AARP, Consumers Union, and the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights to name a few.

S. 352 gives the Obama Administration the time it has told us it needs to fix the coupon program and to better prepare consumers for the transition.

Unfortunately, our time to act on the legislation is short. If we do not pass this measure it is likely that there will be no transition extension. We are less than two weeks away from the transition date. The Senate has passed a delay bill twice by unanimous consent. This bill must reach the President's desk immediately or time will have run out for the Administration to implement the changes necessary to fix the problems with the transition.

I urge Members to support this bill."